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WOMEN IN THE RAILROAD SERVICE

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WOMEN'S employment in the railroad service on a large scale is new. It has really been a war-time innovation due to the shortage of man power—especially in the shops and roundhouses. Last January the total number of women employed was 60,000. By July it had increased to 81,000 with the following geographical distribution: 45,000 in the Eastern District, 8,000 in the Southern and 27,000 in the Western District. By October 1 those numbers were probably increased to a total of approximately 100,000.

Naturally the greatest number are in the clerical and semi-clerical occupations. Of the 81,000 employed July 1, 61,000 were working as clerks of all kinds, stenographers, accountants, comptometer operators, *etc.* In this class appear women ticket sellers and bureau of information clerks who served the public for the first time; they were found well fitted for this type of work, and special instruction agencies were opened by the Government in various states to train them in the intricacies of tariffs and routes.

The next largest group of 4,000 it is not suprising to learn, appears in woman's proverbial occupation of cleaning. Women have long been cleaning stations, offices, *etc.*, but now they are employed in the yards to clean coaches and Pullmans, both inside and outside, and in the roundhouses doing the heavier work of wiping locomotives; 800 were so employed.

In personal service, including work in dining rooms and kitchens, as matrons and janitresses, 2,000 were found.

Women entered the greatest variety of new occupations. In the railroad shops 3,000 were employed, ranging from common laborers to skilled mechanics earning the machinists' or carmen's rate of pay.

Owing to these increases and to the need of caring for the special interests of women, the Women's Service Section was created on August 29, under Mr. Carter, Director of the Divis-

ion of Labor. Women employees had already received attention in the first orders of the Director General. He specified (1) that where women are employed their "working conditions must be healthful and fitted to their needs"; (2) that "the laws enacted for the government of their employment must be observed"; and (3) "their pay when they do the same class of work as men shall be the same as that of men."

These general directions were taken over by the Women's Service Section as its first sailing chart. The scope of its work, it will be noted, is drawn on broad lines, and includes supervision of all the factors affecting the industrial welfare of the women employees. The field agents of the Women's Service Section have been making inspections on the railroads both in the east and west. They are reporting on the exact character of the work required, its suitability for women, the observance of the state labor laws as to hours of work, and, most important, the application of wage rates insuring equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex.

It is perhaps not fully known that the rates of pay for all the diversified occupations of the great transportation service of this country have been standardized, and new increases adjusted for every class of employee. This is now true for all positions, from those of the highest skill and responsibility, down to the humblest scrub woman. To give a concrete example—under a special order the pay of coach cleaners was raised 12c, the present minimum being 28c and maximum 40c.

In a conference on Women in Industry, no point, it seems to me, needs to be more emphasized than the equality of pay for both men and women in this service. The Railroad Administration put itself squarely on record in its first wage order on this fundamental principle, and is living up to it in regard to every occupation.

Women were undoubtedly first engaged about a year and a half ago, before the railroads were put under federal control, because they could be obtained for less pay than men. They were, for instance, engaged as common laborers at 20c-22c an hour, at a time when men were receiving 28c-30c for the same class of labor. With rare exceptions where adjustments are still necessary, the wage orders have absolutely stopped this undercutting of men's wages by women. The Women's Ser-

vice Section received many complaints regarding wages, but in the large majority of cases, the grievances are due to incorrect application of the wage orders or to a wrong calculation of the wage increases, rather than to discrimination between men and women.

Soon after women began to be largely employed it became apparent that some of their work was neither profitable nor appropriate. The use of women as section laborers, for instance, in a gang of men working along the tracks at a distance from any house or station was judged to be unsuitable. This was also found to be the case where women were employed as truckers in depots and warehouses, on account of the extraordinary physical exertion required of them. In view of the wages now paid it was believed possible to secure men and to transfer the women to some class of work suitable to their strength and with proper regard to their health. The railroads were accordingly asked to discontinue the employment of women in both these positions.

Similarly, the work of calling train and engine crews was found to be undesirable. The service requires that the caller must find the train or engine man for whom he is looking, who is often asleep at his home, hotel, or boarding house or caboose, where he must be awakened and his signature secured as acknowledging the call. For obvious reasons the railroads were requested to dismiss women from this occupation. Under these orders, on one railroad employing more than 5,000 women, 223 employed as laborers and 193 employed as truckers were transferred to other jobs. To those of us who are accustomed to methods of factory inspection and the difficulty and delay of securing the enforcement of labor laws, it is a new and welcome experience to secure the kind of concerted action which now exists under the federal control of the railroads. The publicity needed to secure support for the labor laws is not required when the government itself is the employer and specifies the conditions of work which it wishes to have maintained.

It does not mean, however, that the Women's Service Section is not busily engaged in securing improvement of conditions of work. The sudden growth in the number of women employed has in many places not been accompanied by proper supervision for health and comfort. It has therefore proved necessary to

secure proper equipment and better supervision of all the conditions of work. Where for instance, women are working in isolated positions at night in the roundhouses or telephone offices, it has been necessary to secure the transfer, especially of young girls, to day-time shifts. Last fall there was some indication that women might be employed on night shifts as watch-women. The Women's Service Section has however taken the position that older men who may be incapacitated for more active work should be employed on these shifts and that the employment of women be restricted to day-time hours.

There can be no question that women working as laborers have been doing work involving too great muscular exertion. They have handled lumber, loading and unloading it in the yards. They have also lifted great weights of iron scrap—all work of this kind is now being discontinued.

The variety of occupations is surprising. One of the railroads reports the employment of women in 99 different operations. It follows that the conditions of work show wide variation and the adjustment of local conditions in case after case must be taken up.

Comparisons with other industries can probably best be made in respect to the women employed in the shops. They are operating a number of machines such as bolt threaders, nut tappers, drill presses, for which no great skill or experience is needed, and which is classed as "helpers work," and rated at the specified pay of 45c an hour. They are also employed for highly skilled work. A number have succeeded as electric welders and oxy-acetylene burners. They have been found well adapted for work on the air-brake equipment and are cleaning, testing and making minor repairs on triple valves. In some places they are now working in a separate group on the lighter weight valves. After a period of training they are giving satisfaction without the help of any man operator. This is an exceptional achievement which is the result of careful training and the selection of the proper type of worker, as well as of a real desire to develop women as a new source of labor. They have responded to this treatment, take a pride in their work and are doing it well. In other places, however, the introduction of women into these trades has been reluctantly undertaken, and they have been given the least possible instruction. Given this

spirit, the employment of women at new and unaccustomed tasks is not a success and results only in indifferent and uninterested workers.

Women are now found performing the duties of crane operators, of hammer operators in the shops, of turntable operators in the round houses and of packers of the journal boxes in the yards; they are acting as attendants in tool rooms and storehouses; they are doing block-signal work and acting as lever women in the signal towers. This list covers in general the more highly skilled operations in which women have become proficient. The scarcity of male labor has not been sufficient to cause the employment of large numbers in any one of these jobs. On the railroads, as elsewhere in industry, the women of the United States have not felt the compelling pressure experienced in England to leave their wonted occupations and enter new lines of work, but the attraction for the most part lay in the opportunity to earn higher wages than women can usually obtain. A remarkably fine type of woman is now to be seen in many of the shops, who enjoys the greater freedom of her work as compared with factory routine, although in many cases the discomfort, the dirt and exposure is far greater. It remains to be seen whether the women will remain in these jobs to any great extent. The railroads will of course recognize the seniority rights of all their employees returning from military service, but as far as the new employees are concerned, women will have the same privileges as other new employees in retaining their positions or being assigned to other jobs. There can be no doubt that in the clerical and semi-clerical positions, they have proved their worth and will to a great extent be retained.

One further point must be mentioned in regard to the privileges which the women enjoy. They have been given fair treatment not only in regard to pay, but in regard to complaints. A woman is given a hearing according to specific procedure and can appeal her case to the Director of Labor or to the Adjustment Boards at Washington. The representatives of the Brotherhoods are members of the Boards. Thus the women share the gains secured through years of collective bargaining on the part of the men.

In the post-war period, while there is federal control of the

railroads, the women will retain their own seniority rights, including the privileges of promotion. The present indications are that they will remain as a permanent part of the great army of clerical workers, rather than in the out-of-door occupations and in the shops and round houses where the environment is often unavoidably unsuitable.

In the recognition given to the labor of women, the policies regulating their employment on the railroads form a new chapter in the industrial history of our country. It may be considered one of our great gains of the war, hastening the day of uniform recognition of these principles in all industries.

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